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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002213

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: JOURNALISM: THE IMPOSSIBLE PROFESSION IN IRAN

Classified By: DCM Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary: An Iranian journalist, who has been working for Iranian newspapers since 1973, told us that journalism has become "impossible" under Iranian President Ahmadinejad, with restrictions on press freedom now very tight. He characterized the recent release from prison of outspoken journalist Akbar Ganji as the one bright spot in the otherwise deteriorating situation for journalists in Iran. End summary.

TOE THE LINE OR DON'T WORK

2. (C) We recently spoke with Iranian journalist Fereydoun Sedighi and his wife Fereshteh Ghaemmaghani. Sedighi and Ghaemmaghani are applying for visas to immigrate to the United States. Sedighi has worked as a journalist in Iran since 1973, while Ghaemmaghani worked briefly as a journalist and then as high school teacher. From 2004 to March 2006 Sedighi worked as editor-in-chief for the Tehran newspaper Hamvatan. Sedighi told us that Hamvatan focused on human interest stories, sports, television, and cinema, and was completely devoid of political content. In March 2006 Hamvatan closed because, according to Sedighi, the newspaper lost its commercial sponsors when the paper fell into the government's disfavor for not "following the line." Asked to clarify what he meant by "following the line," Sedighi replied that while Hamvatan steered clear of political issues, the newspaper's failure to publish stories complementary to the government caused it to fall into disfavor. He believes that to express its displeasure, the Iranian government pressured Hamvatans' commercial sponsors to cut off their funding. Thus, while the government did not directly order Hamvatan to cease operations, it successfully applied other means to make it impossible for the newspaper to continue operating.

3. (C) Prior to Hamvatan, Sedighi worked as a writer for the Entekhab newspaper from 1999 to 2004. He characterized Entekhab as middle-of-the-road politically, but it was closed by government decree in 2004. From 1973 to 1999, Sedighi worked for the Keyhan newspaper, which he described as very hardline, and which he left because he could no longer tolerate working for such a hardline publication.

4. (C) Asked if journalism has become more difficult under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Sedighi responded that it has become "impossible." He went on to say that the space for journalists to do their work freely has become very narrow, and only those journalists who strictly report the government's official views on issues and have its trust can operate freely. He also noted that it has become more difficult for journalists to travel outside of Iran. He said that like him, most journalists are not trusted by the government and if they are travelling abroad it cannot be for journalistic purposes. Only reporters with the government's official blessing can travel outside Iran to work. Commenting further on the shrinking space for journalistic work, Sedighi said that liberal journalist associations are being squeezed by new, government-backed, hardline groups. Sedighi is a member of the Association of Iranian Journalists, which he estimates currently has a little over 2,000 members and is shrinking. He said that a new association, the Muslim Association of Iranian Journalists, recently formed with the government's backing. Some smaller, independent associations seeking to maintain a neutral stance also formed recently, but Sedighi did not seem optimistic about their future.

AKBAR GANJI'S RELEASE BRIGHT SPOT IN OTHERWISE DETERIORATING
SITUATION

5. (C) Asked about the recent release from prison of outspoken Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji, Sedighi said that it was only due to the international exposure of Ganji's case, including attention from President Bush, Secretary Rice, and the UN Commission for Human Rights, that the Iranian government permitted Ganji to be released. Asked if other journalists had been arrested recently, Sedighi said he believed so but they are not well-known like Ganji and thus their fate is more tenuous.

6. (C) Ghaemmaghani seconded her husband's observations and

said that life for all Iranians, not just journalists, has become more difficult under Ahmadinejad's administration. She confirmed that the government has blocked the CNN and BBC Persian websites but noted that Iranians are quite clever in finding ways to get around internet filtering. She said that each time the government blocks a site, people find a new route to access it and rounds of blocking and going around blocks continue endlessly. Asked about the enforcement of Islamic dress for women, Ghaemmaghani said that it is being strictly observed in government buildings and on college campuses, but that on the street women wear their hejab as they please because they are strong-willed and the government does not have the manpower to enforce dress codes on the public at large.

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